

Is Postmodernism Dead?

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Abstract

This paper argues that Postmodernism has already been dated as a philosophy, at least in the field of literature. As the genesis, evolution and its anti-climax have been crisply discussed, the researcher has cited arguments of the very critics and one time pioneers of postmodernism who have declared it a spent force. This article examines the tenets and even the a priori of postmodernism and finds that in a very deliberate and decisive manner a death blow has been meted out to postmodernism by a simple but amazingly popular fiction, namely Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. The philosophy of life advanced by this popular fiction not only demolishes the very foundations on which Postmodernism stands but also establishes that postmodernism has ceased to become a governing principle *per se*. Coelho's *The Alchemist* is attributed with opening a new trend in literature by synthesizing the past (through Alchemy) with the present even as he lays the foundation for the future.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Ultramodernism, Alchemy, Metanarrative, Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist

Impact of Philosophies on Literature

If we have survived the “death of God” and the “death of man,” we will surely survive the “death of history”—and of truth, reason, morality, society, reality, and all the other verities we used to take for granted and that have now been “problematized.” We will even survive the death of postmodernism. — Gertrude Himmelfarb (in Jenkins, ed. *The Postmodern History Reader*, p 174)

Numerous philosophies have profoundly influenced literature in general and the fiction in particular, yet none has been so influential as Postmodernism. Arguably, it has been a way of

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life, affecting more or less all walks of life unlike any other doctrine. Born out of the nausea of the World War II and its repugnant aftermath, 'postmodernism' became an umbrella word to describe the notion of life chiefly characterized by the fragmentation of the self, multiplicity of meaning, death of the subject or the 'agency', belief in the absence of metanarratives (i.e., systems or notions representing or at least suggesting totality or unifying wholeness), etc. It is a continuation of modernism (Woods 8) but with a difference. For example, instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author accepts that knowledge and meaning are evasive and therefore lamenting the loss of meaning or search for essence is totally uncalled for; on the other hand, existence should be celebrated. These principles too more or less govern the postmodernist literature. Against this backdrop, this paper critically examines Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* to ascertain that this fiction is a trailblazer in announcing the death of postmodernism, at least in literature.

On Defining Postmodernism

'Postmodernism' has been an umbrella term encompassing art, dance, painting, music, architecture, literature, etc. However, this paper confines itself to its cultural and philosophical status and its application in literature. Basically, postmodernism has concerned itself with the present human conditions at large and the postmodern condition is described as a situation where the individual sits powerless, without the agency to strive and have a meaningful life. As a cultural phenomenon 'postmodernism' ruled the academia (the humanities) as the darling for a quarter of a century and it was a great debate whether this notion has already outlived itself. The emergence of postmodernism thus needs to be discussed to arrive at a conclusion regarding its almost mystical 'demise'.

'Postmodernism' as a term entered the lexicon with the historian Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1947). The prefix 'post-' suggests its connection with modernism. Modernism governed the European culture during the first half of the twentieth century, spanning across architecture, music, philosophy, and literature. People like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound, Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka, Pabelo Picasso contributed to this movement, which had conspicuously left Victorianism behind. Movements that were either born or derived inspiration out of this paradigm shift could be named as

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Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism, Imagism and in their respective spheres they ushered in innovative representation. Modernism believes in a search for unity or unified reason and the individual possessing agency. It underlies a deliberate attempt to find meaning in life but is eventually disillusioned. F. H. Bradley's perceptive observation that "Chaos is the order, and order is in the dreams" adequately describes Modernism. Modernist literature (e. g., *The Wasteland*) focuses on this loss. Fragmentation of the self, the breakdown of language, the breakdown of signs, and the breakdown of time happen to be the general characteristics of the modernist literature. Postmodernist literature, on the other hand, acknowledges the death of man (i. e. the subject) and the death of God (as declared by Frederick Nietzsche 'God is dead') but instead of being repentant it celebrates the absence of meaning in life. This is reflected largely in postmodernist fiction.

A Continuation and a Break

Postmodernism is thus both a continuation and a break from modernism. Instead of lamenting the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood, it embraces these characteristics as a pattern of life. The fundamental difference between modernism and postmodernism is thus basically a difference in mood or attitude rather than a chronological difference. As a philosophy and a way of life, postmodernism rejects the notion of selfhood and that people possess agency and can use their capacities to alter, shape, and change the world in which they live. This tendency of postmodernism, as said earlier, has influenced the postmodernist fiction in one way or the other. Against this background, this paper makes an attempt to prove that Paulo Coelho's magnum opus *The Alchemist* (1988) has spearheaded a silent revolution against postmodernism and as far as literature is concerned it should be viewed as the first fiction that has clearly announced the death of postmodernism.

Death of Postmodernism

When Linda Hutcheon announced the death of postmodernism in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* in 1988, she dubbed it as "a thing of the past" and called upon intellectuals "Let's just say: it's over." In fact, postmodernism has been chronicled, analyzed, anticipated, and . . . dispensed with. The debate over the fate of postmodernism has

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been in vogue decades after this eclectic system was theoretically founded by Jean-François Lyotard and preached over by its high priest Jean Baudrillard. As early as on the 15th August 1991, influential authors and critics such as John Barth, Raymond Federman, William Gass, Malcom Bradbury and Ihab Hassan---considered to be pioneers of postmodernism---celebrated the death of postmodernism together, dismissing it as “the concept can no longer serve as a useful explanation in relation to contemporary culture” (cited in Barry Lewis 97).

The questions that spontaneously raise their heads are ‘What caused the death of postmodernism?’ and what is the proof of that. Suffice it to say that amelioration in the economic condition of people, disgust with a down and out materialistic life, and the influence of other marginal and marginalized cultures must have played a significant role in it. Since the scope of the paper does not allow us to indulge in an in-depth analysis of the causes responsible for the death of postmodernism, I would rather concentrate on how Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* has heralded the demise of postmodernism in literature.

To begin with, *The Alchemist* concerns itself with the search for meaning in life. The quest narrative is set in motion in an almost postmodern condition suffered by the protagonist, Santiago, an Andalusian boy, who revolts against tradition and leaves the comforts of home to *know* the world:

His parents had wanted him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family. They worked hard just to have food and water, like the sheep. He had studied Latin, Spanish, and theology. But ever since he had been a child, he had wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins. (Coelho 6)

Not Mere Existence

Santiago is not content with mere existence, for he tends to believe that the purpose of life is to live a purposeful life. In fact the quest is spurred by a dream that visits him recurrently wherein a child invites him to the pyramids of Egypt in search of a hidden treasure. Santiago undertakes the journey and encounters several hostile situations and benign forces (e. g. the

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alchemists of Salem and Al-Fouym), experiences love, becomes an alchemist himself, and eventually discovers the hidden treasure and achieves selfhood. His immersion in the Soul of the World or the Collective Unconscious makes him understand the nature of life and the value of love. At the end, Santiago becomes a self-actualized person. Alchemy determines the theme and the structure of the narrative that *The Alchemist* is. Obviously Coelho has put Santiago at the centre or as a subject and he demonstrates how to live life, nay, to alter life by altering his attitudes. The novelist has propounded that a radical inner transformation, much like in alchemy, is an inexorable condition to achieve selfhood.

Reliance on Alchemy

By relying on alchemy for the theme of the novel, Coelho has shown incredulity towards postmodernism, which is itself characterized by “an incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 7). Alchemy is an ancient system of knowledge which believes that the attainment of perfection is the birthright of Man, Matter, and Nature. It believes that base metals like lead can evolve into gold and an ordinary individual can achieve selfhood. Thus alchemy has posited itself as a metamodel of reality, or a grand narrative with a totalistic framework or a way of framing all experiences. Another metanarrative that Coelho believes in and advances too is love, which he considers to be the greatest magic on earth. The fictionist has laid bare a story of self-actualization which is again anathema to the a priori of postmodernism (i.e., life is meaningless). Thus in all possibilities Paulo Coelho has taken postmodernism by stride.

Selfhood Possible and Desirable

As against the acceptance of the fragmentation of the self, which is fettered in the postmodernist discourses, Paulo Coelho demonstrates through Santiago that selfhood is not only possible but it is also desirable. More so, Coelho provides a roadmap, albeit through alchemy, as to how to achieve the hidden treasure. By roping in alchemy in its psychological implications, the author has narrated how having a dream renders life interesting and the realization of it makes life meaningful. Subtitled as *A Fable Following Your Dream*, *The Alchemist* explains how omens, which stem from the Soul of the World, can guide us in the pursuit of our dream.

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Although Coelho's work contains a fantastic scene where the hero transforms himself into the wind, it is also based on alchemy, which believes in the transmutation of matter and transformation of the soul. The use of the metanarrative of alchemy is thus in all sense cancels out the fundamental assumptions of postmodernism.

Totalizing Effect

Metanarratives have totalizing effect. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon dwells on the implications of the term 'totalizing' in the following words:

The function of the term totalizing, as I understand it, is to point to the process (hence the awkward 'ing' form) by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified – but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them. It is this link to power, as well as process, that the adjective 'totalizing' is meant to suggest, and it is as such that the term has been used to characterize everything from liberal humanist ideals to the aims of historiography. (59)

Incredulity

It is said that postmodernist fiction shows incredulity toward metanarratives and therefore they hinge on an anti-foundationalist social structure and mode of behavior. In other words, postmodernist fiction 'celebrates' the fragmentation of the self (Woods 8) and "refuses to conceive of humanity as a unitary subject striving towards the goal of perfect coherence (in its common stock of beliefs) or of perfect cohesion and stability (in its political practice)" (Lovibond 6). On the other hand, alchemy is a metanarrative that asserts that evolution is teleological and coherence is its hallmark in which the individual has a personal and social role to play. Alchemy thus comes as a contrast to postmodernism, which is "suspicious of the notion of humans possessing an undivided and coherent self which acts as the standard of rationalist, and guarantees all knowledge claims irrespective of time and place" (Woods 10).

Integration and Individuation

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In addition to using this aspect of the philosophy of alchemy, Paulo Coelho uses the alchemical concept of self-realization as propounded by Carl Gustav Jung, who introduced alchemy into modern psychology in the 20th century and whose concept of alchemy Coelho has used in *The Alchemist*. Jung held that the human psyche needs integration which is almost a compulsion, for this is the function of the Self, which impels the individual to achieve selfhood or totality. Unification of sensibility by integrating the divided selves in the psyche makes an integrated person. This process was named by Jung as ‘individuation’ and this concept was identified to be anticipated by alchemy. Much like Jung, Coelho believes that life can be meaningful and *The Alchemist*, which is written in the form of a biographical inquiry, is a demonstration of this notion of self-realization.

Character is Destiny

Coelho agrees with the assumptions of alchemy that the greatest goal of life is self-realization (i.e., to become what we have the potentiality to be). He does not subscribe to the postmodernist theory that individuals are powerless to alter, shape, and improve their life. On the other hand, he believes that character is destiny and our unconscious is as powerful as our conscious in shaping our personality. In other words, the affirmation that life is what we make of it is clearly discernible in his works, especially in *The Alchemist*. When postmodernism drives reason out of the bounds and sees life as chaotic, Coelho much in agreement to alchemy sees that all things and beings in the universe are connected. An excerpt from *The Alchemist* reads:

The boy was beginning to understand that intuition is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it's all written there. The celebration of this connection is manifested in love, again a metanarrative that Coelho champions the cause of in an otherwise disconsolate, postmodern world. Love is the magic that impels one to be successful. (48).

Love is the Magic

The celebration of this connection is manifested in love, again a metanarrative that Coelho champions the cause of in an otherwise disconsolate, postmodern world. Love is the magic that impels one to be successful. Paulo Coelho highlights: “When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too” (100). For there is a correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm and both of them are governed by order, which the Elizabethans called ‘Degree’. The fictionist thus sees order where his postmodern counterparts would see absence of order.

A reader may be tempted to ask whether Paulo Coelho has any truck with postmodernism.

Magic Realism

Interestingly enough, the term ‘postmodernism’ came into existence in the very year he was born (i. e., 1947). He is often regarded as a postmodernist novelist (See Mansour 92; Riza-Ezel 34). He has also adopted a literary style (a genre) which is more often associated with postmodernism---Magic realism. The term was first officially used by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a form of art which presented the real in a marvelous way. Over time, Magic Realism has evolved as a form of literary expression and artistic style or a genre (of fiction) in which magical elements blend with the real world. According to Roh, it “employs [...] techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things” (1995: 17-18). So far as Magic Realism is concerned, Paulo Coelho has frequently made use of this genre and *The Alchemist* testifies to it. The alchemist’s power of transforming lead into gold is nothing but magic in the fiction. When the alchemist tells Santiago that contemplation even on a grain of sand could unveil the mysteries of the universe, it is magical realism in which the ordinary is defamiliarized. This aspect is highlighted first in the alchemist’s persuasion of Santiago about the interconnectedness of the things and beings in the universe and how the understanding of one thing helps the understanding of another:

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The desert will give you an understanding of the world; in fact, anything on the face of the earth will do that. You don't even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation. (Coelho 83)

Transmutation – Another Facet

Besides this magical aspect of realism, Santiago's transmutation into the wind through his dialogues is nothing but magic. The list can linger. However, it is not at all safe to conclude that Paulo Coelho is a postmodernist novelist only from the use of Magic Realism. In fact, the major literary styles which are characteristics of postmodernist novels are pastiche and parody. Irony is also the undertone of many a postmodernist novel. Hence Paulo Coelho is not strictly a postmodernist novelist.

Getting Better

Apart from restoring the concept of the Self in *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho blasts postmodernism through his treatment of notions like love, language, and time. While highlighting the important role love can play in one's life, the novelist asserts: "When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too" (144). He believes that love is a transformative force, a magic, which can help an ordinary person to realize themselves. It is the love for Fatima, his beloved, that Santiago courts the risk of interpreting the flight of the hawks and the impending danger for the island of Al-Fayoum. His impersonal love again enables him to teach the wind, the sun, etc. about the ennobling and uplifting nature of love. Further, Coelho believes that love dwells in the heart of people. As such, one should listen to one's heart: "Remember that wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure" (111). Thus, love has the capacity to unlock the secrets of the heart and the treasure that is hard to attain. Love, which can connect one with people and the world, is a metanarrative. Thus, willy-nilly Coelho has "punctured" the assumptions of postmodernism in *The Alchemist*.

Languages of the World, of God, and of the Soul

It may appear that Coelho has attempted at a critique of postmodernism deliberately in *The Alchemist* if we consider his approach to language in the novel. The author talks of languages rather than a language. For example, he mentions the ‘language of the world’ (i.e., ordinary human languages), the language of God (e. g., dreams), the ‘language of the soul’ (i. e., symbolism), and the universal language (i. e., love). Santiago had to listen to, learn and use different languages at different times. The universal language---Love---“doesn't depend on words” and the boy had experienced it with his sheep first and then with people. His sheep had taught him that:

. . . there was a language in the world that everyone understood, a language the boy had used throughout the time that he was trying to improve things at the shop. It was the language of enthusiasm, of things accomplished with love and purpose, and as part of a search for something believed in and desired. (Coelho 40)

Santiago is of course here speaking of the universal language of love. Coelho asserts that alchemy pioneered the use of this language. This is evident when the English man says:

“Everything in life is an omen,” said the Englishman, now closing the journal he was reading. “There is a universal language, understood by everybody, but already forgotten. I am in search of that universal language, among other things. That’s why I’m here. I have to find a man who knows that universal language. An alchemist.” (Coelho 45)

Unity in Diversity through Alchemy

Paulo Coelho speaks of unity in diversity through alchemy, the metamodel of reality.

As we see, Paulo Coelho seems to have roped in alchemy to speak a different voice, strike a dissimilar note which runs counter to postmodernist ideas and techniques. His is a positive affirmation of the immense possibilities and latent potentialities in an individual; and he

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has an invincible faith in it. He is aware that the human race has survived modernism and postmodernism. It is time that it learned living with ameliorating and enlightening world views which confirm that human beings are basically good and they achieve totality of being, and save Man and Nature. Coelho forwards a philosophy of life that transcends the modernist and postmodernist attitudes to life and the world: he preaches that in spite of the 'postmodern condition,' one can not only undertake a modernist quest for meaning but, unlike the modernists, one can realize the Self. Santiago's basic identity of a shepherd metamorphosed into a 'realized self' at the end testifies to this point. It is not like Yeats' dismal picture of things fall apart and the inability of the centre to hold ('The Second Coming') and the unleashing of devastating force of ruin and destruction. The Alchemist does not state a note of cacophony but a symphony preaching the message of love, the unifying force, and the resultant harmony that facilitates the attainment of selfhood. In reality, with a note of dissent, Coelho has blown the conch announcing the death of postmodernism in literature. It is gainsay that Paulo Coelho has presented an alternative notion of life which has replaced modernism and postmodernism. It is now left to the intellectual community not only to debate over the current status of Postmodernism but also whether the new trend that has taken postmodernism in a stride can be called *Ultramodernism*.

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